

# Bird brains may be bigger than we think

by Todd Eskelin

Ever wonder why people don't get your subtle clues that you are in a hurry and need to get going? Like when you bump into a friend at the grocery store and you keep looking toward the door, but they just keep talking. You glance over again and nothing. They just don't see that you are giving them hints with your eyes that you need to be somewhere else. Recently a study came out in Europe that birds can actually recognize human gaze and alter their behavior accordingly. So are these birds smarter than our friends at the grocery store?

This was a very controlled study where Jackdaws, a close relative of crows, were hand-reared and were trained for particular food preferences. These birds were tested with and without the researchers gazing in the direction of the hidden food. Consistently, birds who were able to watch the researchers gazing in the direction of the food found the reward quicker than those who did not have the advantage of researchers' eyes leading the way.

Admittedly, there are a whole host of reasons why we can't look at this study and make sweeping statements about bird intelligence. But, it is still fascinating that these birds were able to watch a person's eyes and determine the location of hidden food. So, I am hesitant to make any comparisons to my friends after this study, but it raises some interesting questions about bird abilities.

OK, now I am intrigued. I wonder if our local crows are as smart as European Jackdaws. I had the opportunity to work with some researchers banding Northwestern Crows in the local area a few years ago and I am convinced from our anecdotal observations that our crows are at least as smart as Jackdaws. We were baiting crows with their all-time favorite food, Cheese Puffs. The trap was a large net suspended over the Cheese Puffs, and when several crows would go under it to retrieve food, we would pull a string and drop the net on them.

If we were standing around a short distance away or sitting in the car watching the trap, the crows would go in one at a time while the others watched us. If we even glanced over at the pull cord, they would react and move just out of range.

We then decided to try and just catch one crow rather than going for the home run of three or four at a time. While processing the one we had just captured, we all had our heads down working on the one bird, and four crows bolted in under the net and grabbed some food. Of course, when we looked up they all retreated. Now I don't need to tell you, but I will. Of course WE were smarter than those crows and figured out that all we had to do was look down and act like we were working up another crow, and boom we caught three in one pull. This worked for a little while and then the rest of the group decided the french fries over in Kenai were a safer bet.

We tried again two weeks later with the same methods and found that many of the birds remembered us and we had limited success. The following year we had good success early in the season, indicating that their long term memory is not as good, or perhaps there was a turnover in the population and we were working with new birds.

So, armed with this information I headed down to the grocery store parking lot and did my own little test. I rolled down the window and looked eye to eye with a crow. I gave it my very best look of, "I have food and would love to give you some" and I got a blank stare back. It was definitely watching me. So then I changed my look to, "If I could stomach it I would eat you right here in this parking lot." I got the similar blank stare response until another car pulled up and started dumping out their unwanted french fries. I immediately lost all my audience. Result: inconclusive. The bird was smart enough to figure out I was teasing it, but my study design really didn't help me determine if the bird was able to recognize facial expressions. Guess I will leave it to the pros with the hand-raised birds, and simply admit that the average crow is fairly smart, I just don't know how smart.

The real point is that stereotypic comments about "bird brains" may be a little misdirected. There are times I would put my money on the birds when it came to an IQ test and sometimes we just don't give them enough credit. Maybe, when we are concerned about that poor bird that seems to be here too late in the year to migrate, we should consider the possibility that it

wanted to be here. Now if I can just teach the ravens to call in a moose for me...

*Todd Eskelin is a Biological Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and has conducted research on songbirds in many areas of the*

*state. You can check on local birds or report your bird sighting on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Birding Hotline (907) 262-2300. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*